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Kais Saied's government refuses to reckon with the country's rampant anti-Semitism.

By **Simon Speakman Cordall**, a freelance journalist based in Tunisia.

[Foreign Policy](#) (02.06.2023) – Tunisia has largely moved on from the May 9 killing of five people at the El Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba by a National Guardsman. The event's prominence on the country's news sites has diminished and its claim on Tunisian conversation has largely been ceded to the other items competing for space at the national table.

On-air criticism of police recruitment methods by radio hosts Haythem El Mekki and Elyes Gharbi swiftly resulted in a legal complaint from the security services and, essentially, an end to discussion.

Thus far, Tunisia has steadfastly refused to publicly address the anti-Semitic nature of the attack, preferring instead to characterize it as "criminal." However, the fact that the Jewish tourists and locals gathering to celebrate the festival of Lag B'Omer were specifically targeted by the attacker, 30-year-old National Guardsman Wissam Khazri, is hard to dispute.

After killing his colleague, Khazri donned body armor and rode 12 miles by quad bike to attack the pilgrims at the synagogue. However, beyond the arrest of four conspirators, his motivation for doing so, or details of any radicalization, remains unknown.

Responding to the murders, Germany and France characterized the attack as anti-Semitic, with Paris going even further and launching a terrorism probe into the killing of one of its citizens—a dual-national who was among the victims.

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For Tunisian President Kais Saied's government, the story was simply too messy. This year's tourism revenues, which are vital following the uncertainty surrounding the hard-pressed country's latest bailout from the International Monetary Fund, represent one of the few economic bright spots on a dark financial horizon. That security around the synagogue appeared to have failed—the attack was undertaken by one of the island's supposed defenders—despite the massive expense and planning involved was also pushed to the sidelines.

However, underpinning all of this was the identity of the targeted victims and the deliberate and premeditated assault upon the Jewish community.

The Jewish presence in Tunisia reaches back almost 2,000 years. Over the centuries, through occupation by Phoenicians and Romans, conquest by Arabs, and colonization by

Ottomans and the French, Tunisia's Jews have maintained an unbroken thread linking past and present Tunisia. However, since World War II and the establishment of Israel in 1948, their numbers have dwindled. Pressure at home and opportunities overseas have reduced the population from around 100,000 in 1948 to less than 1,800 today.

Of all the Jewish communities that once dotted northern Tunisia, only that on the island of Djerba remains. The synagogue there, whose foundations are said to date back to Jerusalem's Temple of Solomon, remains a cornerstone of not simply Tunisian Jewish identity, but Jewish identity as a whole.

The reasons for this declining population are rooted in recent history. Tunisia's steadfast support of the Palestinian cause, a matter of profound faith for many, has embedded itself across all levels of society. From 1982 to 1985, Tunisia hosted the headquarters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in a suburb just south of the capital, Tunis, until an Israeli air campaign essentially wiped it from the map, inspiring one of the first isolated assaults on the synagogue on Djerba by way of reprisal.

Many Tunisians are acutely aware of every injustice visited upon the Palestinian population. That, along with years of unflinching official opposition to the Israeli state, has almost certainly combined to make life in the country uncomfortable for many Tunisian Jews. By way of evidence, we only need to look to the spikes in emigration to both France and Israel that followed the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

Whatever some may say, it is clear that what happens in the Middle East carries consequences for Tunisia's Jews and how they're regarded by their compatriots.

In the wake of the synagogue attack last month, one Twitter user achieved temporary notoriety after discovering that one of the victims, Aviel Hadad, was to be buried in Israel. Hadad had held dual citizenship with Israel and—in much the same way as many Muslims ask to be buried in Mecca, without opining on Saudi politics—had asked to be interred there. Nevertheless, one Tunisian blogger called for Hadad's Tunisian family to be expelled from the country and any officials who knew of his wishes to be prosecuted.

A prominent journalist, on discovering that a victim of the attack held an Israeli passport, asked if the country was mourning Zionists. Across the country's ubiquitous radio channels, a major source of news and information for many, conversations on Tunisia's attitudes to Jews came to be almost exclusively couched in discussions on the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, with the fate and welfare of Tunisian citizens judged by the actions of a distant state that few had any connections with.